

What Does *Getting Results* Say About Youth Development?

Youth development is the name of an approach that focuses on building youths' assets rather than repairing their deficits. Youth development strategies help most young people—including those challenged by multiple risks and adversities—to grow into thriving adults. The research clearly shows that school is a critical opportunity for support of positive development in youths (*Getting Results, Update 1*, p. 44).

Summary of Youth Development Research

Research studies across a broad variety of fields have begun to identify a clear set of factors that can protect children and adolescents from involvement in risky behaviors.

Connectedness. A study of 20,000 students in grades 7–12 found that school connectedness was the only school-related factor that consistently protected students from engaging in unhealthy behaviors. “School connectedness” means that students have a sense of belonging at school and perceive that teachers are fair and care about them (*Getting Results, Update 1*, pp. 35–36).

Developmental Assets. A study involving more than 99,000 students in grades 6–12 investigated the role of 40 developmental assets in protecting adolescents from a variety of health-compromising behaviors. Developmental assets include those relating to the individual and those relating to his or her environment. Many of the 40 developmental assets identified by the Search Institute pertain to the school environment. Environmental assets comprise the following aspects in a school: a caring school climate, parent involvement in schooling, clear rules and consequences in the school and family, and high expectations from teachers and parents. Individual assets relate to a student's achievement motivation, school engagement, and bonding to school.

When students find their school environment to be supportive and caring, they are less likely to become involved in substance abuse, violence, and other problem behaviors. The greater the number of developmental assets a student reported, the lower the high-risk behaviors (*Getting Results, Update 1*, pp. 24–25).

Resilience. Forty years of research that followed 700 individuals from birth to adulthood found that the presence of a committed caregiver, a broad community support system, and engaging social skills were the three most powerful predictors that children at risk would grow up to be healthy, functioning adults (*Getting Results, Part I*, pp. 136–137). Research on resilience also identifies caring relationships, messages of high expectations, and opportunities for participation and contribution as factors supporting positive youth development. These supports, referred to as “external resilience assets” or protective factors, are associated with both lack of involvement in health-compromising behaviors and with academic success (*Getting Results, Update 5*, pp. 33–34).

School Climate. A large-scale study that followed children from ages 10 to 16 investigated what made schools successful in terms of students’ problem behaviors. Schools with fewer student problems (i.e., “successful” schools) displayed a positive school climate; opportunities for student planning and decision making; and a warm, close, personal relationship between the students and an adult (*Getting Results, Part I*, pp. 121–123).

School-Based Programs with a Youth Development Focus

Many effective prevention programs use youth development principles. For elementary-aged children, those programs focus on building interpersonal skills, prosocial attitudes and behaviors, and autonomy and self-direction. For middle and high school students, the programs emphasize improving decision-making skills and increasing school bonding experiences. To obtain information about effective programs, visit the Healthy Kids Resource Center’s Web site at <http://www.californiahealthykids.org>.

As students get older, they experience an increased need for a “voice” in school improvement efforts. Primary outcomes that are common across many youth development programs are (1) increases in prosocial bonding/social skills; (2) improved self-concept; (3) decline in perceived stress, social anxiety, or loneliness; and (4) more positive attitudes toward school. Secondary outcomes for most of the youth development programs are (1) increased academic achievement; (2) reduced delinquency and misbehavior; and (3) decreased alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use. The following table displays the primary and secondary outcomes of five youth development prevention programs.

School-Based Programs Using Youth Development Principles

Program Title	Program Focus and Activities	Primary Outcomes	Secondary Outcomes	Getting Results Reference
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: Pre K-Grade 6				
Child Development Project/Caring School Community (K–6)	Emphasis on positive interpersonal values and attitudes; a supportive classroom and school environment; student autonomy, influence, and self-direction; participation in classroom decision making	Increased prosocial attitudes, behaviors, peer social acceptance, trust in teachers, liking for school, class engagement; decreased loneliness and social anxiety	Increased academic achievement (shown by grade point average and district testing); decreased alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use; decreased delinquency (e.g., carrying weapons)	<i>Part I</i> , pp. 46–48 <i>Update 5</i> , pp. 46–47
Project ACHIEVE ¹ (Pre-K–8)	Emphasis on schoolwide strategic planning, curriculum-based assessment, behavioral interventions, parent involvement strategies	Improved school climate and increases in student social skills	Increased student achievement; decreased special education and disciplinary referrals, grade retention, and suspensions	<i>Part I</i> , pp. 130–132
Seattle Social Development Project (SOAR) (K–6)	Proactive classroom management; interactive teaching; cooperative learning; and social skills training. Parent training: child behavior management, academic support, and antisocial prevention	Increased attachment and commitment to school, study skills, persistence, and social competence	Increased academic achievement; reduced delinquency	<i>Update 3</i> , pp. 35–38 <i>Update 5</i> , pp. 49–50 <i>Part I</i> , p. 101

¹ *Project ACHIEVE* is also a middle school program.

Program Title	Program Focus and Activities	Primary Outcomes	Secondary Outcomes	Getting Results Reference
MIDDLE SCHOOL: Grades 6-8				
Lions-Quest Skills for Adolescence (6-8)	Emphasis on student learning and applying thinking (problem solving, decision making, goal setting) and social (refusal, communication, making friends) skills	Increase in self-concept scores; more positive attitudes toward school	Delay in initiation of substance use and delay in transition to additional substances	<i>Update 2</i> , pp. 24–31
Positive Action Through Holistic Education (Project PATHE) ² (6–12)	Staff and students design and carry out school improvement plans, school and classroom rules; mini-courses on study skills, and activities to improve school climate	Increased commitment to school and academic achievement; increased social bonding with school; improved self-concepts	Increased school attendance; reduced drug involvement; reduced delinquency and misbehavior	<i>Part I</i> , pp. 130-132 <i>Update 5</i> , pp. 47–48

² Project PATHE is also a high school program.

Beyond Programs: What Schools Can Do to Promote Youth Development

Although fully adopting and embracing youth development takes time, schools can follow research-based youth development principles in assessment and monitoring, planning, training/staff development, collaboration, and setting of policies and procedures in the following ways.

Assessment and Monitoring: Assess students' assets and the school climate with simple, valid, and reliable instruments, such as the Resilience and Youth Development Module of the California Healthy Kids Survey. The survey is available online (http://www.wested.org/pub/docs/chks_home.html).

The Resilience and Youth Development Module (RYDM) of the California Healthy Kids Survey assesses the school climate (external assets) and student's resilience (internal assets). External assets are clustered into (1) caring relationships at school; (2) messages of high expectations at school; and (3) opportunities for meaningful participation at school. Internal assets are measured in the areas of (1) social competence; (2) autonomy and sense of self; and (3) sense of purpose and future. Research using results of the RYDM has found that schools that provide caring and supportive environments in which students are challenged to excellence can enhance students' assets and skills and are associated with greater academic achievement.

Planning: Have focus-group discussions with students and adults on what the school is doing to promote caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for student participation. Listen to youth voices and include older youths in making decisions.

Training/Staff Development: Devote time during training of staff and board members to create a positive school climate and foster protective factors and students' assets and resiliency.

Policies and Procedures: Examine board policies, administrative regulations, and school guidelines to identify ways in which fostering youth development and creating a caring school community can be supported through school standards, plans, the culture, and the mission.